Interview with Kent Dorsey, afc2016037_04021
July 15, 2017
Interviewed and filmed at Washburn and Dorsey Funeral Home in Bostic, North Carolina, by Sarah Bryan and Will Bryan for Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession

Sarah Bryan: Okay, well, let me ask you to introduce yourself for the film, and would you say where we are today?

Kent Dorsey: We're in the metropolis of Bostic, North Carolina. My name is Kent Dorsey. I own a nonprofit funeral home (laughs), Washburn and Dorsey. It's a small place. We serve usually 50 families a year here.

SB: And how long have you been in this field?

KD: I started in the business in high school in 1981. I was working in radio, and started working part-time in a funeral home, really just for something to fall back on. I had a concern that when I was 40 years old I couldn't do radio anymore. Wasn't sure—I was small-market radio—and wasn't sure I could continue to do that, so I was looking for another profession. This is really just something to fall back on.

SB: How did you make that transition?

KD: Was working at the radio station, and just went by a funeral home and kept bothering them, and they kept telling me, "We don't need anyone." And I said, "Well, if you let me just hang around, can I do some work?" They said, "Well, that'll be okay," and 30 days later they called me and got my Social Security number and started paying me. So I started working after high school. The radio station after high school put me on the third shift—which is where they put all the important people. If you're going to put an important radio person on, you want them midnight to six. And so that was my air shift, and I would work funerals during the day, and I got to looking at the funeral service program through the community college that I could go, and I thought I had nothing to lose by taking classes locally. Sociology, psychology, English, speaking—and then transferred to the mortuary school. So I started doing that. And it was kind of a rough time in my life, as far as, work midnight to six, go to class from eight to ten, try to catch a nap here, work a funeral in the afternoon. But when you're 19 you can do that.

SB: Were there skills you learned in radio that you carried into this career?

KD: I don't know that there was a whole lot of that. The biggest thing was answering the phone at both places used to stymie me, because I had to pause and think, "WXIK" before I answered the phone or "McKinney-Landreth Funeral Home?" One or the other. But I don't know that there's a lot of skills that transferred one from the other.

Occasionally someone at the funeral home would recognize me from being at the radio station.

SB: Would you tell me a bit about that first funeral home where you worked, and the people you worked with?

KD: Ah, it was McKinney-Landreth in Cliffside, Horton Landreth and A. C. McKinney. And they had a partnership. Mr. McKinney was the embalmer, and again, I primarily just worked visitations and funerals at that time. I would watch Mr. Landreth embalm, and I had a bit of a defeatist attitude. I would watch Mr. Landreth and say, "I'll never be able to do this." I mean, he would say things like, "Do you see where this leg's getting distribution of chemical?" and I wouldn't see a thing. I just couldn't recognize it. So I just had this attitude that it was too hard for me to do. It was not something that I would do in life. But again, when they stuck me on that midnight to six radio job, I got to thinking later, "I've got nothing to lose." Go through the community college system, pay $51 a quarter, and get an education at the same time. I had a high school teacher who tried to talk me into going to college, or community college, after high school, and I ignored him, told him to get lost. And he—I'll never forget—he said, "It's not just the education you get, it's the people you meet, and the experiences you have. That's what's important. You need to get away from home and do this." And no greater words ever spoken. At the end of two years, that was my thought. The people I met and experiences I had just going to the local community college were wonderful. Some fantastic times. A lot of good people in the mortuary sciences program too.

SB: What was Mr. Landreth like?

KD: Never got angry. Soft-spoken. Everybody in the community loved him. I can remember one time on a Friday we had a chapel service, and it was my job after they left to turn the air conditioning back up. It was summertime. And I forgot it. So that entire building ran at 65 degrees where it should have been at 80. And he found it, I think on Sunday night or Monday morning, and never said a thing about it. And that's something here now would drive me crazy. I would have a fit if an employee left the air conditioning on after we didn't need it. But he was that type of person. And I think that had an impact on me. I tried to—I don't know that I did it, but I tried to treat my employees that way. He was just so soft-spoken, and a good guy. [Thunder outside]

SB: Did you grow up in Cliffside?

KD: I actually grew up in Forest City, which was several miles away.

[VIDEO: 00:05:00; AUDIO: 00:05:05] I worked at a Forest City radio station and a Shelby radio station, which is in an adjacent county. So all in this general area. It's pretty close.

SB: What about your family? Did your parents grow up in this area?

KD: They did. They were divorced when I was nine. My father was an alcoholic, kind of a rough upbringing, to a degree. Two older brothers. And I think the only thing, all three of us started working at a young age. I was 14 when I started to work at the radio station. And all of us, I think, were kind of scared of failure. It was something about growing up in that alcoholic home, that divorce home, that you didn't want to remain in that cycle, you wanted to rise above it, and I've noticed in life, some people have an energy to rise above it and some get right back into that cycle. So that was my goal at that age, was not to be into that cycle that I grew up in.

SB: Do you think that having experiences like that when you were growing up has helped you relate to people in your work?

KD: Yeah, I think so. I think—that's interesting, because in a way we have to speak to people through all socioeconomic areas, and it gives you a respect in different socioeconomic areas, different religions, having an open mind in a lot of areas. Yeah, that's a good point, Sarah, that it does.

SB: What was mortuary school like?

KD: It was a lot of fun. There's a certain type of person the school draws, and it's usually—they're outgoing, they like fun. We were in a school at that time that had 60 curriculums and 10,000 students, but you could walk into an anatomy classroom or microbiology classroom and tell who the funeral service students were. The paralegals were being very nice and quiet; the paramedics were, the physical therapists. And the funeral service crowd was laughing and cutting up. And I had a chemistry teacher constantly saying, "Shut up, funeral service! Shut up, funeral service!" She knew who it was making the problems. So it's almost like there's a certain type of person that the business draws, and you could definitely see that in school. And to a degree we were maybe a little of the outcasts at the school. We were such a small percentage of what made up the population there that they would cast a wary eye, the other students would, at us. But that is an experience, again, going back to that high school teacher, Jim Bridges, who told me that it's not just the education you get but the people you meet, the experiences you have. I would not give that up for anything. It was just a wonderful time in life, and of course you're 19, you're 20, you're open to those things and wanting to take in life too, I think.

SB: I'm really interested that you mention people in this field being outgoing, because that's something I've noticed, very strongly in this project, is the outgoing, friendly nature of the funeral directors. And I wonder—what is it that draws people of that, you know, makeup to this field?

KD: I don't know. It's just something in their personality, maybe a flaw. (Laughs) Maybe some form of mental illness. I'm not sure! But I can definitely testify to the fact that it was that way in school and a lot of the funeral homes I've been in. Every funeral home, it seemed like, I've been in or known about, always had the grouchy old man; they had a grouchy old man that could say anything to a family that the rest of us wanted to say, maybe, and get away with it, and people just loved them anyway. They just hugged their necks and went on. So, I don't know. It's just a certain person it draws.

SB: It seems like that would translate wonderfully to the interpersonal aspects of your work, but then there's the clinical, technical side as well.

KD: And that variety is great. I mean, whether you're in the embalming room—and there are those of us who enjoy the embalming process, we enjoy the science of it. We deal with families. Later today I'll go take a tent down. So there's a lot of variety in this business that gets you outside, inside, dealing with people, dealing in the embalming room, areas like that. The variety is good. The confinement is the downside to it. The confinement, the 24-hour-a-day, 365-day responsibility. As a small owner, we have figured out, the wife and I have, one-third of the time we get to take a vacation.

[VIDEO: 00:10:00; AUDIO: 00:10:02] One-third of the time it get cancelled at the last minute, and one-third of the time we have to come back from a vacation. In most professions, you get away, you get away. And we don't here. As a small place, we're expected to be here. But I knew that when I signed up for the business. I can't complain about it. It does, it is difficult on you, it takes a toll on you, I think, to a degree.

SB: How about for your family? What is it like, do you think, for them, being in a family in the funeral service industry?

KD: Is my family concerned about me being in it? I don't know that there's a— My father, who died in 1998 just months after I bought the funeral home, was never crazy about the idea. He was so skittish around something like this. He never understood it. My wife has to deal with the pressures I mentioned to you earlier—just of things canceled, me not being around. Her birthday is Monday; will I be there or not? I don't know. But both my brothers, they've worked in—one of them worked in NASCAR for a long time, another one worked in body work and later 911, and they would have nothing to do with this business. They're not interested in it at all.

SB: Going back to the sort of chronological part of the story—so you were working for Mr. Landreth, and gaining experience that way. What was next in your work?

KD: Next was going to mortuary school in Fayetteville from 1982 to 1984. I just assumed I would come back to McKinney and Landreth after school. They didn't have a

position, and I thought Asheville, North Carolina, would be a nice place to live. So I went to Groce in Asheville, and stayed there for seven years after I was licensed. And the Groces were great people; the town and I never gee-hawed. I just never gelled in that metropolitan environment, and wanted to get back to a small town. So in 1988 I returned to the county, I worked for McMahan's, and also I was a trade embalmer, meaning I went to many, many different firms to embalm for them. Because not all—not every funeral director is an embalmer, and then some funeral homes just stay so busy they need a trade embalmer to come in from the outside. And that, a lot of that's 10:00 at night and 2:00 in the morning work.

SB: What was that experience like?

KD: Just—you know, when I was younger I could take the phone ringing at two AM. I'm a little older now, and that's a sick sound when that phone rings at two AM. But I had to stop the trade embalming when I was about age 42. I just got to the point that running to somebody else's place all night long was catching up with me. And by then I had the business, and was having to attend to it more. It's just back then we did a lot of nighttime embalming, and now a lot of firms aren't doing that at night. They're waiting, doing it in the day. Now, a small-town funeral home, 50 calls, it's done at two AM, because I'm going to be here waiting on the family at nine-thirty or ten. So I've got to do it that way. But it was a good experience. Made a lot of good friends trade-embalming at other funeral homes. Good colleagues.

SB: And when did you begin—you said you bought this funeral home in—

KD: In 1998. It was kind of an interesting situation. I was Mr. Washburn's trade embalmer, and all I would do was come in and embalm for him and leave. That was it. And he had a heart attack on Valentine's Day, 1998. And I went to see him in the emergency room, they were going to ship him out to another hospital, and he said, "I'm going to close the funeral home temporarily. And I said, "You can't. You'll kill it. How will you announce you're back in business?" He said, "I have no other choice." And another colleague, Shane Early from Padgett and King, came to me and said, "You tell Mr. Washburn that me and you and Horton Landreth will run that place for him until he can get on his feet again." And so McMahan's was good enough to give me a leave of absence, and I worked at McMahan's and tried to run Washburn as much as I could until Mr. Washburn could get out of the business—get out of the hospital. When he got out of the hospital, I think the doctor pretty much told him, "Your working days are numbered. With this heart problem, you don't need to be out working the parking lot when it's 17 degrees, or when it's 98." So we were originally going to form a partnership. That did not come to pass. He finally decided just to sell the business. And then we had to build a new building three years after that and move to it.

SB: Is that this building?

KD: Yes. Yes, it is.

SB: It's a great building.

KD: Thanks. Thanks!

SB: Did you design it yourself?

KD: I did. There was an engineer who went behind me as a part of the builder who redid some things, and everything he did was great. I had the bathrooms in an odd place, so he fixed that.

[VIDEO: 00:15:00; AUDIO: 00:15:00] The only thing at all, he had an entryway that I didn't like, and I had him change that. But everything else, the whole general idea of an L-shaped visitation room that could be turned into a chapel was my concept. And then it goes around to a hallway, so the outer perimeter is all a public lineup area, and the little things we don't need as much—the casket selection room, the office, the storage—is in the middle of the building. We wanted as many windows and airy points as we could get. Mm-hmm.

SB: What other changes did you bring about here when you first came in, in those first years?

KD: Just simple things. A PA system at the grave. We do that. We added bottled water to grave. But now that's done by a lot of people, that's not even unique to us. I'm real peculiar about the vehicles; when we're not busy I'm waxing vehicles, keeping them cleaned up. We've got a bunch of them. We've got a bunch of old ones. So I try to take care of those vehicles, and things like that. And this is really the first time that the funeral home—Mr. Washburn owned the general store, so his focus was the general store and the funeral home—so this is the first time in the history of the funeral home that it just had a funeral director who owned it and their total focus was on the business.

SB: From the time that you were first working on funerals to today, what are some of the changes you've seen? I imagine that's a big question, so if we could start with, say, just the logistics of the funeral in, was it 1981 you started?

KD: 1981, yes. Back then, everybody had a service. If it was a 97-year-old woman in a nursing home for 15 years, she had a service. And now, increasingly, we're hearing people say, "I don't want anything. I don't want a service at all." The telephone is a big difference. Back then, the phone, when we had a death, it would ring all day long, people getting arrangements. We had a large service the other day that I had three

people call and ask the arrangements. Huge service. Because they're getting it from the Internet. They're getting their information from the website. Flowers is a big change. The funeral we had, the 97-year-old woman who'd been in the rest home for 15 years had a vanload of flowers. Now the flower shop calls to say "We've got a bunch of flowers," they bring seven. So flowers have been a big change, telephones have been a big change. Years ago people used to do the night-before visitation, service the next day. That is come more into doing the same-day visitations, which I'm not a big fan of. So those are some of the huge changes. What we call home equipment—taking out to the home funeral signs, chairs, register stand—everybody wanted that 36 years ago. Now it's down to probably one-fifth of the people. They don't even want to draw attention to the house. They don't want the funeral signs, or they don't need any chairs. So a lot of those things are what I've seen the largest changes, so far.

SB: How about in the service itself, in terms of choices about minister, music, things like that?

KD: You know, in the Bible Belt, there's not been a big change clergy-wise. There has been some change music-wise. People are a little more free to choose songs that you would not have heard at a funeral 36 years ago. They're wearing clothes to a funeral you would not have worn 36 years ago. So it's a little more of a casual atmosphere. And then those new terms come along: "celebration of life," that type of thing. And I was told a celebration of life really is supposed to be a service devoid of religious meaning. I'm not positive about it. I don't think people around here recognize that. They just call it a celebration of life, because they want to avoid the word "funeral" sometimes. And it's almost like the people we deal with, whatever their mother or father held dear—which could have been a big church funeral, visitation the night before, a nice casket, nice vault—they don't want it. It's almost like, I don't know if it's a rebellion or something, but it's almost like they want something else. Yeah.

SB: How do you feel about that kind of change?

KD: I don't know. I don't know. It's just symptomatic of the whole world right now and how things are going and things are changing. I just feel like a dinosaur. I feel like the guy who, when I was in my twenties, I would watch the old guys and laugh at them. "Man, they just can't adjust to change, can they? They can't accept that people want memorial folders with pictures on them."

[VIDEO: 00:20:00; AUDIO: 00:19:58] And now I'm that guy. Now I'm the guy that doesn't like the term celebration of life. I'm the one that doesn't like a same-day visitation. Because those are changes that I just don't like to see. So I feel like the old dinosaur.

SB: Are there calls that have stayed with you over the years, for—well, for any reason, but if you think back to certain parts of your career, do you think this family really stays with you?

KD: Yeah, I think there's a lot that are vivid for some reason or another. It could have been a circumstance. It could have been a young person. It could have been someone with some notoriety. And then there's some that, it scares me, I look back over old obituaries and the name and the people don't mean—my memory is just not good enough to generate who that was and what happened. But there are, it's just like anything else. There are some that just stick with you, and the situation. And especially when I was in both Fayetteville and Asheville and working services, because things happen in big cities that don't happen in small towns, and odd circumstances. Odd deaths, and things like that. And yet we've had some in a small area too. Murders and suicides, people I've known, that were just absolute shocks—and are emotionally taxing on us. I've had several, I don't know how to put this into words, that, had the family not called me it would have hurt my feelings, because I knew the person so well; but there was also that realization, "Oh, man, I've got to go through this for four days. This is not going to be easy. And there's not going to be any rest for four days. And the attention to detail that we're going to have to give to get to this end is going to be tough." And it is emotionally taxing.

SB: You've covered part of the answer to this question already, I know, but how is it different for you, working with a friend who has died, versus somebody who maybe you'd never met before and the family calls you?

KD: It just stays with you more, I think. And as I've got older I've had more emotional trouble dealing with it, I think, whereas I used to was a rock. When I was in my twenties and my thirties, I could handle it. But I also think that's symptomatic of just getting older, viewing life differently, and realizing how deep people's loss is and how much it hurts them. And at age 54, I just about can't stand to get a call from a family saying, "Our 18-year-old wrapped a car around a tree and he's dead." I— And twenty years ago it was a part of the business, you had to go through it and do it. Now it's emotionally taxing on us, very difficult on us. Not near what the family is, theirs is a hundred times worse than us. But it is difficult. And other than doing an aftercare program for the family where we send some books to them, I don't know what else to do for them. I really don't. I haven't walked in their shoes.

SB: That's especially interesting to me because in some ways you'd think that maybe people would sort of, you know, harden up over time, that there'd be almost like a callousing effect. But it sounds like it's the opposite.

KD: I understand that, but you know, interestingly enough, some colleagues of mine who are my age, have been in the business about—we've talked about it, and they're

the same way. And it's interesting. But again, I think it's got more to do with aging and thinking of value of life, or having our own loss in life at some point, that affected us so deeply that if this death that affected me over here was so deep and how I had to handle it, then this family over here had a 21-year-old that died suddenly, or an 18-year-old, or a seven-year old with leukemia, that must be a hundred times worse. How do they get through that? How do you get through that? And all I know to do is give them their options, try not to rush them, and hope to do the right thing. Treat them like I'd want to be treated. But past that, I don't know what that answer is. Because us funeral directors aren't any better, I don't think, at handling our own grief than anybody else is. We're not experts at it. I just think the key with us is knowing what not to say sometimes. So that you don't hurt somebody worse.

[VIDEO: 00:25:00; AUDIO: 00:25:00] SB: This may be—tell me if this is an area you'd rather not include here—but when you've lost a loved one yourself, you say that being in this profession doesn't make your grief any easier, but does it affect other choices that you make, in terms of if you have to work with another funeral home with a loved one, or— Hard to articulate what I'm asking—which I'm still thinking through! Well, I wonder what it's like for a funeral director to receive a call from a family in which there's another funeral director.

KD: You know, I hear about that occasionally. I think they all dread it, because, deep down, it's like, "Oh, man. This guy is going to want this done and that done." That happens. I would say in most situations, a lot of funeral directors—I'm just being candid with you—a lot of us say, "Oh, no. Such-and-Such is in that family, and they're going to be critiquing everything we did, and saying, 'We're going to want it this way," or, "This is how we write obituaries in Richmond,'" or whatever. They're going to want it a certain way. So I'll be, just being very honest, I think we dread that. We dread that in most cases, mm-hmm.

SB: How are—can you talk a bit about the process of dealing with the families or the other people who come to you, say, working through issues with relatives who might be in conflict.

KD: Oh, you mean as far as a dispute in the family.

SB: Yeah.

KD: You know, that's another thing that we've seen increase, and I hear that in common with other funeral directors, that we have more dysfunctional families now than we did 10 years, 20 years, 30 years ago. Or it's rearing its head in front of us more. And what we have to do most of the time as funeral directors is ride the fence, and stay out of it as much as we can, stay neutral as much as we can. We dread those situations. Once in a while I'll have a funeral, somebody will say, "Boy, I bet you had a hard time

with that family," and I didn't, and it's a situation where they didn't involve me in it. And if they didn't involve me, then I'm okay. I'm more peculiar about that than I was 20 years ago, that I don't need to know the dirt, I don't need to know that Sally thinks Janie's crazy. You know, sometimes a warning, if you've got a certain situation with a family, that helps. But more and more dysfunctional families are coming through the door. They absolutely are. And it'll rear its head during a death. Very often. It can be financial, it can be some sibling rivalry from years ago, it can be any number of things. And here being candid again, there'll be some wonderful couple in the community you just think the world of, and their kids will come in and you'll think, "How in the word were these mean children raised in that house? They're driving me up the wall." That happens. And I try to find something in each family that I like, or people that I like. And once you find that, or for me it works, then you can gee-haw with them. I just had two families in a row that were like that. They were so easy to deal with, so easy to speak to. And you look for little clues, look for little clues: can we go somewhere with humor, or not? And if you can go somewhere with humor, make them smile occasionally, that's a good thing. And there's a joke I use over and over and over, when they're buying their thank-you cards—we charge five dollars for unlimited supply of thank-you cards—and I tell them every time, matter of fact some families have probably heard it three times in thirty years, "Now if you need extra thank-you cards, you tell me, and I'll tuck a box of 25 and tie them to a brick and lob them through your front window." They usually laugh, and I say, "This way you get free thank-you cards, and I get to do some vandalism in the process." But you can't do that with every family. There's about ten percent that are going to look at you like, "Hmm. He's not a comedian." So you have to kind of know those limits that you can go with a family. Or when I ask them about memorials and they're silent, I say, "Would you like to put down the Kent Dorsey Get Me Through Life Fund?" And that usually brings a few laughs. But you have to kind of figure out with the family how far you can—and sometimes you know how far you can.

SB: As a business owner, when you're looking, when you're hiring an employee, are those qualities you look for? And how do you spot them?

[VIDEO: 00:30:05; AUDIO 00:30:10] KD: Wow. That, that is— I don't know, sometimes there's just a feeling. You look for intelligence, you look for people-people who are good with the public. We also have to have people here at this small place who are physically able, because all of my part-timers in my case are on call to go with me. If we have a home call, then they may have to go with me. We go into some homes that are not built to take a stretcher into it. So we get into some difficult physical situations. I always thought—this is the craziest thing I thought—going into owning the business, that personnel would be glamorous. "Oh, wow, you can hire these people." But that was my biggest surprise. It's not glamorous. It's difficult to pick the right people. Everybody that comes in the door has baggage. They may have some wonderful things about them, but they've also got some areas you've got to dance around or address. So personnel is not glamorous. I was really wrong on that one. But I don't know,

sometimes I just get a certain feeling. Most all of our staff was hand-picked by me. I called someone and said, "Hmm, what do you think about coming and working at the funeral home some?" We have a former law-enforcement officer who had worked with us some, had never given any idea, and I called him and asked if he'd be interested, and after three months of sitting at home he said, "Let's try that." And you know, I thought the staff was going to stand around like this all day long, and I found out you're a great group of guys, and enjoy life, and perform a good service. And he's become a key employee that people love.

SB: What advice do you give to your employees about how to—say, how to deal with the emotional aspects of your work?

KD: I don't know that we delve into the emotional a whole lot. We had an employee whose 28-year-old son was killed. Tragic accident. And our entire staff was grief-stricken. And an outside funeral home came in and worked the visitation for us. We worked the funeral, but they worked the visitation for us. Sometimes you can even get put in situations where you've got to call a colleague and say, "Can you come in and handle this? Because I can't." But I don't know that we delve a lot into that. Our biggest rule with employees, because we do training twice a year is, working here, you're going to find something out about a family or a funeral that you have no business telling outside these doors. It could be their financial situation, it could be the fact that they don't get along, it could be that they made a strange request. You do not need to be the employee that gets caught telling something outside these doors. And I said, people in the public will pick you for information, especially when it's a tragic death, a young person's death, a questionable death, a murder, a suicide. They're going to, they will come to you and ask you at the store or the post office to give you details. And you can't do that. You have, we have to respect that privacy. And we cover that each time we do training, as to how you need to handle that.

SB: What else is involved in the twice-a-year training?

KD: We go over everything. We have an assigned job at each funeral: who's at the foot end of the casket and what their duties are, who's at the head end of the casket and what their duties are, who stays in the church or chapel and excuses as I take the family out. So answering the telephone, what's expected with the telephone, how do you operate the motor vehicles, always wear a seatbelt, things like that. Every situation I've been put in as an employer or an owner, for 36 years, I try to address with them. If I see something happen on a funeral I don't like, I make a little note. I'll give you an example. I saw something on a funeral a couple of years ago that we did, but one of my fellows who took the casket with the pallbearers got so—he headed the casket to the grave, but he suddenly got interested in the fact that the hearse door needed to be closed. Well, the pallbearers were all looking around, they didn't know where to go or weren't being directed. So I made a note that the next time we did training, "Look. The hearse door

can stay open. You got six men that's probably never been pallbearers before. I want you to focus on them. I'll go close the door later, or you can later, but right now, let's focus on this casket." So that type of thing, I just make a list over time. We go into training, we talk about it. And every time, the first discussion is do not be the employee that gets caught talking outside this building or telling anything about any issues with the family or something that happened with a funeral.

[VIDEO: 00:35:05; AUDIO: 00:35:10] Because a good funeral, perfect funeral, can be ruined—and I've seen it happen in other places—by getting a call three days later and saying, "Such-and-Such heard [snaps] this."

SB: You mentioned the privacy issues in, say, traumatic deaths or murders. What is it like working with—or what is your relationship with law enforcement, when there's a, you know, maybe a body that's gone through autopsy or—

KD: Most of the time we are not in real direct contact with law enforcement, unless they need to come back and do something later, or ask some questions. Or once in a blue moon you'll have a death, there's not an autopsy, some family member says, "Well, I think they were beaten to death," or they weren't treated right, or something. Law enforcement may call and ask a few questions. But outside of that we don't have a lot of contact. I've been to, when I worked in a firm in Asheville, to several scenes. Self-inflicted gunshots, one gentleman jumped off the twelfth floor of a motel, carbon monoxide. And those were always kind of odd ones, because we'd go to so many home deaths, but it's a terminal illness. But when I was in Asheville we actually went to the scene many times of one of those. And those were always a little eerie, a little eerie being there, where something like that happened.

SB: How do you process something like that—I mean emotionally—how do you take care of yourself when you've seen something terrible?

KD: You know, it must go back to the type of person this business draws. You—I think paramedics are like this and law enforcement are like this—after you've seen so much, you do develop a callousedness to that side of it. [Video cuts out at 00:37:03 for battery change.] But there are things you will see. I'll be honest with you, I don't think I'll ever get used to seeing a decapitated body. And I've been doing this for 36 years, and I've seen less than five. But that is not something that you'll ever forget. There are certain odors, with burns, that you never forget. And yet also we've built up a resistance sometimes to some of those odors. I went into a home where a gentleman had died, been dead three or four days. And I went there, and the fire department, they were all in their breathing apparatus and gear and I walked right in and sprayed two bottles of spray, and put him in a body bag and got him out. They were just amazed. And part of it was just being around it for so many years. And there are certain odors

that are going to bother you, certain that don't too. I went somewhere totally different from what you were asking. (Laughs)

SB: No, that's really fascinating.

[AUDIO: 00:38:00 - 00:38:39:35 – changing camera battery, chatting about recording. VIDEO resumes at 00:38:00]

SB: I think when the camera went off just now you were talking about the things that you never get used to seeing. Would you mind rolling back over that a little bit? About just—how there are certain situations that—.

KD: I think you never get used to, or I don't, seeing a decapitated person. And in 36 years I've probably seen five or less, but that is not something—you know, you see it in horror movies, but seeing it in real life is very different. The odor of burns is something you don't forget. So there's just certain circumstances and situations. And yet we, I think we do build up an immunity, especially to certain odors. Someone told me they were watching one of the TV stations, sorry, TV shows, where they were showing a morgue, and they make it look sexy! They bathe the back wall of the morgue in beautiful blue light, and they're standing there doing the autopsy, and people like to watch it. They said, but what they're missing is the odors that go with it. And see, we're privy to that part. Not easy to put on television and make it look right.

SB: I think it's natural for people, or for many people, to be frightened of a dead body.

KD: Mm-hm.

SB: Was there ever a time in your life when you were?

KD: I don't—I don't ever remember being afraid, no. And I find that probably most of our profession's that way. I think the first day I walked into work, Mr. McKinney said, "I'm glad you're here. We're going to such-and-such hospital to pick up Mrs. Such-and-Such."

[VIDEO: 00:40:04; AUDIO: 00:41:20] And I hadn't expected that. I thought I would go in, we would sit around for a few days and I'd get used to the place. But that was the first thing that happened, was we went to a hospital and picked up a body. Now I do remember when we got back, I was ready to go home. I had taken in enough for that day. But went back the next day, and Mr. Landreth mentioned to me one time, said, "Ehh, I never thought you'd make it. I never thought you'd stay in it after seeing you go home that first day." And after that, again, there's just some type of immunity built up, I suppose, to it.

SB: Um—I don't think I've asked this before, tell me if I have. What do you think makes a good funeral director? What are the qualities?

KD: Patience. Um, being a good people-person. Not being a phony. Don't be a fake. You know, we were taught in school, for instance, we were taught in school to greet a family, [deep, formal voice] "I'm sorry about Mr. Jones." But I realized after a while, that just sounded like a canned response, that if I didn't know Mr. Jones, that that might sound a little bit fake. Just be genuine with people, and try to be a good read of people, how far can you go with them in a certain subject. Be relatable with them regardless of their socioeconomic status or where they are. I'll be honest with you; I've found that when you have to deal with crazy people, and you do have to deal with some crazy people, you can't sugarcoat things. If you're dealing with somebody that's a little bit out there on the fringe, you've just got to be plainspoken. Don't sugarcoat things, because they don't get that. And you're going to deal with people occasionally who are a sandwich shy of a picnic, somewhere along the way.

SB: Do people ever come to you with requests for services that, you know, you just can't comply with, for whatever reason?

KD: Yeah, the customer is not always right. I'll be honest with you. The customer is not always right. And I've heard funeral directors defend, say, "Well, if someone came to me and wanted the body displayed in a recliner with the remote in their hand, the TV— But each funeral home and each funeral director has to decide, "How do I want to be represented? Do I want to be represented as a funeral home that would display a body in a recliner with a remote in their hand, or not?" And I hear some funeral directors say, "You've got to do it. In order to compete you've got to be competitive and do whatever the family wants." But I disagree. There are some things that a family's going to ask you to do that you're just going to have to say, "Well, you're going to have to go somewhere else," if it were an extreme request or something really odd. I remember a situation in the mountains that happened one time, where this young man had gotten killed in an accident, and had some financial trouble, and a church offered to let them have a grave space and use of the church. And then the family put a shirt on the young man that said "Raise hell." And it caused a problem with the church. So there are times you've got to draw a line and figure out where do I want to be in this? Do I want to be represented this way? Am I going to be the type that does everything? Well, there are some crazy requests out there, so you've got to make a decision on that.

SB: Has that increased over the years? The crazy requests?

KD: I think a little bit, but I can't right now, to memory, come up with anything that was real wild lately. Yeah, I think you're going to continue to see—because I think people are putting their stamp on funerals more. They're not going through as much

with the basic religious protocol of, here's what we're going to do, we're going to sing these three religious songs and the preacher's going to pray, and we're going to walk out. They're doing more of the odd things and interjecting, or—having anyone stand up during the service and say something. And I've heard a few of those that got a little out of hand.

SB: Have attitudes toward cremation changed in this community? Can you talk a little bit about that?

KD: Yeah, I think it has everywhere. And it goes back to the, "Whatever Mom and Dad held dear, I don't want," is what I seem to see a little bit, that they just—"No, that's not for us. Why go to the expense of buying a nice casket and a vault and placing it in the ground?" Other than that, sometimes I want to ask people, "What is the appeal? What is to the appeal of saying, 'We looked at all of our options, and our decision was we want to burn the body.'" And yet when people come in and want it, that's fine with me, but I don't totally understand it.

[VIDEO: 00:45:07; AUDIO 00:46:22] SB: Where do you see the future of this profession in the coming years?

KD: Less embalming, less funeral homes, more competitiveness as far as low-cost operations. I have several funeral directors my age and we talk about this often, who kind of bemoan where it's headed and where it's been lately. But I remind him, "We've lived in some really good days." I like the big, nice hearse, and I like to take care of it, but it's going to go out of the building less and less. I lived in a day where, if you did a hundred deaths, three were cremations—or less. So I've lived through some good times in the business, but it's going to continue to be more direct-disposal, cremation or some of the other forms that they've come up with in terms of body disposal that don't involve burial. And occasionally it concerns me, when people don't want a gravesite at all, even for an urn. I've got a good friend, died last year, cremated. He doesn't have a grave. And I kind of wish he did. I wish he had a place. Even symbolic, just for me.

SB: Is it healthier, do you think, for the people left behind to have that kind of place?

KD: I think so, but then again people are so different, I don't know that everybody holds that dear. So it might be my hypersensitivity to it because I'm in this every day. Mm-hmm.

SB: We've covered a lot of topics, but what have we not talked about that you would like to be sure that we include?

KD: Make sure we include. Wow. Let's see, Sarah. I know we've discussed changes. I had something on my mind earlier this week and I can't come up with it. My mind is blank. Any suggestions?

SB: I think this has been great. We've covered a lot.

KD: You've got one of those beeper things to take the profane language out? Just that this business takes a toll on us. Physically; had shoulder surgery last year, and it really reminded me then, if I'd been a schoolteacher, or if I'd been in law enforcement, I'd be retiring right now. And so physically it takes a toll. And it definitely does emotionally, and for whatever reason that's happening with increasing frequency as we get older. And that's a good point you make, that we think we're more callous as we get old, but in truth, every one of my colleagues I know of my age are having a more difficult time emotionally. And you have to learn to separate yourself, to a degree, from some of your emotions, but there are some that you just can't. That's all I can think of, Sarah. It's been a good life. It's been a good profession for me. But it sure is changing.

SB: Thank you so much for telling us about it.

KD: All right.

[VIDEO ends at 00:48:42; AUDIO ends at 00:50:12]